

What you need to know about **Pandemic Influenza (“flu”)**

What is pandemic flu?

A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease in many countries at the same time. A pandemic of influenza—or flu—occurs when a new flu virus rapidly spreads from country-to-country around the world. The swift spread of a pandemic flu happens because people are not immune to the new flu virus, and an effective vaccine would take months to develop.

In addition, sick people who travel from country-to-country can be a source of infection, as occurred in the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in Asia and Canada in 2003. Pandemics are not just particularly bad flu seasons. In fact, they are not seasonal at all; they can happen anytime.

What is the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic?

An *epidemic* is an outbreak of a disease that occurs in one or several limited areas, like a city, state, or country.

Once the disease spreads around the borders of several countries and affects many countries across the globe, it is called a *pandemic*. In the last century, several pandemics of influenza occurred – the biggest one in 1918. During the 1918 pandemic, at least 500,000 Americans died, estimated deaths worldwide numbered 10 million.

What is avian flu?

There are many strains—or types—of flu virus. Certain strains infect humans, birds or animals. An influenza virus strain that infects birds is called *avian* flu or bird flu. Usually this virus only infects birds, and when an outbreak occurs it can have a very serious impact on poultry flocks. Outbreaks of avian flu have occurred on several continents including North America in the last five years. An ongoing outbreak of avian flu in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe has resulted in the killing of millions of chickens and other domestic birds to control the spread of the disease. Rarely, a virus may be able to infect both birds and animals, or birds and humans.

Are pandemic flu and avian flu the same thing?

No. Pandemic flu is not a type of flu but is the way the flu spreads. In fact any disease can be a pandemic if it spreads rapidly between people all over the world.

The avian flu currently in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe (H5N1) may be spread to people who directly handle infected birds or bird waste, but currently can't be spread easily from person to person. However, flu viruses change, and this virus could change in a way that makes it possible for people to pass it to each other. If that happens and people in many countries get sick, the virus becomes a pandemic flu strain.

Why should we be concerned about a virus that infects birds?

The strain of avian flu causing the outbreak in Asian and Eastern European birds is of concern for several reasons:

- This flu strain can spread from birds to people, and when it does, it can cause very serious human illness and even death. So far, the virus does not appear to spread from person-to-person, but that could change.
- Whenever a bird flu strain infects people, there is a chance that the virus could change to a brand new flu virus that spreads easily from person-to-person and causes serious illness.
- Infections with new human flu strains can't be prevented by the flu vaccine that people get each year, so no one will be immune to the virus. Making a safe vaccine that can prevent infection with a new human virus can take months.
- Because this type of new virus couldn't be easily controlled, it could spread rapidly around the world and cause a pandemic.

Why is everyone so concerned about this flu? Don't people get the flu every year?

The flu we get each year is called "seasonal" flu. Although the virus changes slightly from year to year, it is always a version of the flu from recent years so most of us have built-up some immunity or tolerance to it. The flu that may develop from the bird flu would be completely new and that makes it more dangerous because we have no immunity to it.

Will a seasonal flu shot protect me from avian flu?

No. The flu shot available each year only protects you from that season's flu. There is currently no vaccine for avian flu. A seasonal flu shot is still a good idea, though, and should be part of everyone's personal health plan. For other ideas on staying healthy, see the Washington State Department of Health's *Preventing the Spread of Germs* fact sheet.

Is it safe to eat chicken and turkey?

Yes. Currently, there are no reported poultry flocks in the U.S. infected with avian flu. Poultry is safe to eat, but you should always follow safe preparation and cooking procedures when handling any raw poultry. Be sure to thoroughly wash your hands after handling any uncooked meat.

For more information: The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife monitors wild birds in our state, and the Department of Agriculture monitors U.S. birds in the farming and poultry industries.

Are my pets safe from avian flu?

There is no current risk to pets in Washington. Cats fed raw infected poultry in Asia have developed avian flu, however pets have not been infected elsewhere.

There are a few precautions you should take with pet birds:

- Keep all pet birds inside to avoid exposure to wild or migratory birds.
- Always wash your hands after handling birds or having contact with bird waste.
- If you are buying a new pet bird—especially an exotic type—be sure it was born and raised locally. It is illegal to import birds from regions that are infected with avian flu because these birds can be a source of introducing avian flu to a new area.

What is the Department of Health doing to prepare for pandemic flu?

The Department of Health—working with local, state, federal and Canadian partners—has been planning for a potential pandemic flu outbreak and taking action to help protect the health of people in our state. For complete details, please see the Washington State Department of Health's Pandemic Influenza Plan Overview.

Where can I get further information?

You can find additional information about pandemic influenza on these Web sites:

Washington State Department of Health: www.doh.wa.gov/panflu

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/flu/avian

Department of Health and Human Services: www.pandemicflu.gov